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The right stuff: Area chefs say quality of meats, vegetables, other ingredients is key factor in food flavors

Business First of Louisville - by [Robyn Davis Sekula](#) Business First Correspondent

A dozen times per week or more, Jay Denham, executive chef of Park Place on Main and Browning's Restaurant and Brewery, meets with a local farmer who is bringing his wares to the restaurants for possible use.

Denham relishes these visits. The farmers often bring pleasant surprises for him, and Denham is eager to put the items to use in new and exciting ways.

"Quality is first," Denham said. "I look for local, seasonal items first. If I can't find it locally, I try to find it regionally. I like to celebrate what Kentucky, Southern Indiana and the South has to offer. A lot of people don't understand how much local, sustainable agriculture there is in Kentucky."

Denham, like many local chefs, buys as much as possible from local farmers, including poultry, beef, bison, pork, produce, eggs and other items.

He also buys from food-distribution company **Grasshopper Distribution LLC**, which specializes in items from area farmers. Grasshopper has saved him hours of time, as Denham used to personally go to farms to choose items. Grasshopper now brings much of that to him.

Denham thinks the local cuisine makes a big difference in the quality of the food at his restaurant.

"There is so much difference in a free range egg from a local farm" than an egg shipped in from somewhere else, Denham said. "They are so much richer and have so much flavor. With lamb, the taste of (local) lamb is phenomenal. Grass-fed beef is fantastic. All of the farmers I use don't use any pesticides or hormones, so they are organic."

On the hunt

For chefs, a big part of creating a crowd-pleasing menu is getting just the right ingredients. But it's not always easy. Chefs rely on relationships with suppliers to get the type and quality of ingredients they need to make menu staples and to pull off a special they have in mind.

Dishes served are dictated by what's available and what's at its best. Items such as tomatoes -- a summer favorite -- play heavily in the warmer months. Fall brings apple dishes, and winter brings comforting foods such as meat and potatoes.

Area chefs said those local culinary trends resulted largely because those foods are what are available, although some suppliers have found ways around some of the seasonal variations.

Greens from a greenhouse

Laurent Geroli, executive chef of The Brown Hotel, which includes three restaurants, banquets and room service, said one farmer he works with in Kentucky grows microgreens for him year-round. The grower operates out of a greenhouse in months that are too cold for outdoor crops.

Geroli said he turns to the Internet on occasion to research sources for items he wants. He uses a supplier in Cleveland for some seasonal items, since that particular supplier has a greenhouse that keeps the operation thriving year-round. In winter months, produce also is likely to come from Florida, California and Mexico.



In the fall, one of Geroli's favorite items to feature is apples. He buys apples from local farmers, uses them on the hotel's various menus and also puts a basket near the check-in desk so customers can grab one on the way to their room.

Bread for the hotel comes from Louisville's Blue Dog Bakery.

"That's the best bread we can find in the city," Geroli said. "It's not because we can't make it. We don't have the equipment to make the quality of bread he can."

From far and wide

One item that often must to be shipped in from other states is seafood.

Allen Grimm, executive chef of Z's Oyster Bar and Steakhouse, said he has all of the restaurant's fresh fish flown in from Hawaii.

Grimm likes to personally pick up the fish so he can examine it and make sure it meets his standards. For oysters, an obvious standard at the restaurant, Grimm relies on one supplier, who gives him a list each week that gives him 40 types of oysters to select from.

Grimm avoids oysters that are spawning, because of possible problems with quality.

The majority of oysters are served on the half-shell, raw. The restaurant keeps seven varieties on hand most of the time.

Fresh markets offer seasonal delights

For fruits and vegetables, Grimm likes to visit fresh markets in the area and pick food himself during the spring and summer months. He frequents an outdoor produce market in The Highlands, near his home, that stocks good produce during the summer months.

One of Grimm's favorite ingredients is soft-shell crab. He likes to buy it from local suppliers, and he will call around to different seafood purveyors until he can find some nearby.

Denham, of Park Place on Main, said he believes that both chefs and consumers are paying more attention to where food comes from, and that they say they can taste the difference.

"For those people who really get it, it makes a difference, and it certainly makes a difference for us," Denham said. "Now, it's becoming in vogue. I really want to support all of the local farmers."

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